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SUBJECT: Lebanon: Media Reaction - January 23, 2009

Atmospherics:

President Obama's decisions and activities continue to be given top billing in the Lebanese press. Several media outlets tried to interpret President Obama's intentions for the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Iraq by trying to understand the background of his diplomatic appointees to the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Editorialists seemed to believe that President Obama will give priority to the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, and will move war from Iraq to Afghanistan. Some newspapers sounded disappointed with his position on Hamas, but also noted with satisfaction that he already signed an Executive Order to close Guantanamo, "the prison of shame," and observed that he tried to create a balance between Israel's right to security and the Palestinians' right to hope for a bright future.

Selected Headlines

"Farewell Guantanamo" pro-opposition Al-Akhbar

"Obama Continues the Israeli War against the Palestinian People"
Arab nationalist As-Safir

"Obama Appoints the Diplomatic Envoys for the Middle East and Afghanistan; He Calls for Hamas to Recognize Israel and Expresses his Sympathy with the Palestinians; Mitchell to the Region Soon and Guantanamo to be Closed within a Year" Mainstream Sunni Al-Liwa'

"Do Not Enter: The Prison of Shame Has Been Closed" Independent
Al-Balad

Block Quotes:

"Phone Diplomacy," an editorial by Sateh Nouredine in Arab nationalist As-Safir (1/23):

"...The new American President Barak Obama did his first four telephone calls from the White House to four Middle Eastern leaders: Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, Egyptian President Mubarak; Jordanian King Abdallah, and the Palestinian President Abbas. The White House did not announce a lot of details about these calls. ...Many speculated about these phone calls: Were they the first thing Obama did on the first day of his presidency? Was he trying to fulfill his promises during the Israeli aggression on Gaza when he said that he will give the Gaza issue the attention it deserves when he assumes his responsibilities as president? ...In any case, his choosing these four leaders specifically...was certainly intentional. ...It is an indication that the United States will give priority to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. ...Furthermore, President Obama's call to President Abbas gave him additional international legitimacy particularly since he will be given the funds to rebuild Gaza instead of Hamas..."

